

Opening Statement by Rep. Dan Burton
Chairman, Western Hemisphere Subcommittee
House International Relations Committee
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Democracy in Venezuela

Today we are convening a hearing on Democracy in Venezuela to take stock of the state of political and economic freedoms in that country. Your testimony today will help the Subcommittee in making an assessment of political developments in that country, so that we may take an objective inventory of real and perceived threats to democratic institutions and freedoms and the implications for stability in the region. It will also help us achieve a better understanding of the opportunities to strengthen U.S. engagement in the region that is geared to promoting democratic and equitable growth and stability.

I first want to welcome the Honorable Thomas A. Shannon, the newly sworn-in Assistant Secretary for Western Hemisphere Affairs. Thank you for joining us this morning. We look forward to working with you Tom and we share Secretary Rice and President Bush's confidence in your capacity to execute your duties.

I am convinced by the growing body of evidence that the government of Venezuela is dismantling the institutions of democracy. I also believe the greatest threat to democracy in Venezuela is authoritarianism. The greatest threat to democracy in Venezuela is not American hegemony or free markets. It is fragile or corrupted institutions, the lack of respect for constitutional mechanisms and the rule of law.

In the 1970s Venezuela enjoyed a tradition of civilian democratic rule and earned a reputation as one of the more stable democracies in Latin America with a burgeoning middle class. The United States has traditionally had close relations with Venezuela, but there has been deepening friction in the relationship with President Chavez accompanied by an erosion of democratic institutions. The government of Venezuela is becoming more authoritarian; replacing the country's multiparty democracy with a political system that revolves around the state with its president controlling all the levers of power - some call this a STATIFICATION of Venezuelan society. Others point to the increasing influence of the armed forces and President Chávez's open admiration of Che Guevara and cooperation with Castro's regime in Cuba as a matter of deep concern. Given Mr. Castro's record in Cuba, I can certainly appreciate this concern.

In President Chavez's speech at the Summit of Americas meeting this month, he talked about the revolutionary goals of communist Che Guevara, and the need for Guevara's revolution to continue throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. I want to tell President Chavez that my Colleagues and I do not support his idea of a communist revolution throughout Latin America, and simply abhor his vitriolic, leftist, revolutionary rhetoric. While we wish to work with President Chavez to create better U.S. - Venezuela relations, his continued use of dangerous, destabilizing, anti-U.S. rhetoric, is unacceptable and could easily lead to serious problems. All of the democratically-elected governments in the region are concerned about the activities of the Venezuelan president. If he continues to follow the path of his rhetoric, it is apparent that he poses a threat to freedom and democracy in Central and South America.

His speech at the demonstration during the Summit of the Americas was un-statesmanlike and he lost an opportunity to engage his fellow leaders in discussing the pressing issues of our hemisphere in a constructive way.

What can we and other democracies in our hemisphere do to prevent Mr. Chavez from undermining, if he is trying to undermine, these other fledgling democracies in Central and South America?

Our government and like-minded societies that have embraced the promise of democracy are seeking to spread prosperity throughout the Western Hemisphere by means different than Mr. Chavez, namely through reforms, long-term economic and social development and political stability and where the rights and freedoms of individuals are respected. President Chavez has called this “Neo-Imperialism” and says it is something that we are trying to impose on the rest of the world. The facts are however, President Bush has laid out a roadmap for cooperation to consolidate democracy in the Western Hemisphere, and use trade as a catalyst for positive growth in the region to create conditions which will alleviate poverty and strengthen democratic institutions. Most of the governments in the region want to participate in these goals. Twenty-nine of the 34 Western Hemisphere nations that met down in Argentina earlier this month are in favor of moving forward on negotiations with the FTAA.

A turn to authoritarianism poses a grave danger to the social fabric in Venezuela and the region and does not present a viable alternative that can otherwise lift the millions who now live in poverty out from their despair.

While our policies may be condemned and while our leaders may be scorned, the fact remains that we are committed to working closely with the people of Venezuela to create new opportunities to rebuild a relationship that is in our mutual interests.

I now recognize my good friend, the distinguished Ranking Member from New Jersey, Bob Menendez for any statement he may wish to make.